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ABSTRACT

The status of different approaches to teaching business English in West Germany are explored, and it is concluded that business profiles, business situations, and the development of language skills must be considered in designing a business language course. The concept of interactive business competence in English and German as a basis for business language instruction is based on the understanding that language is a form of interaction transcending language skills, and that interactive language teaching needs to incorporate intercultural aspects into a situational approach. The perspective taken is that of a designer of business English instruction in Germany. It is concluded that: (1) business language courses should be oriented to the roles students will assume later in their jobs, (2) teaching methods should use a business-related situational approach emphasizing formal and informal communication, and (3) the overall goals of the programs should be to prepare students to interact competently in English in their roles as managers. (MSE)

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THE CONCEPT OF INTERACTIVE BUSINESS COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH AND GERMAN

by

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THE CONCEPT OF INTERACTIVE BUSINESS COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH AND GERMAN

The following paper will cover three aspects:

1. The PRACTICAL ASPECT is a brief status report of different approaches to business English as it is taught at various institutions in Germany today (a.o. "Volkshochschulen","Fachhochschulen", "Berufsakademien").

2. The THEORETICAL ASPECT covers questions relating to (a) the target group and the degree of specialized English required, (b) the communicative situations that are relevant for the future business executive who interacts in more than one language, and (c) the combination of language skills needed for dealing effectively with business situat.ons in more than one language.

3. The DIDACTICAL ASPECT attempts to formulate objectives for a business English program that are based on the practical foreign language needs identified in recent surveys in Germany (Bausch K.-R. et al.1980, Christ, H./Liebe, E./Schröder,K. 1979, Christ, H./Schwarze A. 1985, Schroder, K./Langheld,D./Macht, K. 1978).

The key to the didactic aspect is the concept of INTERACTIVE BUSINESS COMPETENCE which is introduced as the overall objective for a business language program (English or German). It consists of three interrelated components:

3.1 a LANGUAGE COMPONENT which combines the traditional skills of listening, reading, writing and speaking into a complex of communicative functions.

3.2 a BUSINESS COMPONENT which integrates English language and business subject matter into business courses in English. And

3.3 an INTERACTIVE COMPONENT which goes beyond the concept of communicative competence and stresses the socio-intercultural aspect of language as a form of interaction.

Figure 1

THE CONCEPT OF INTERACTIVE BUSINESS COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH

incorporates three interrelated components:

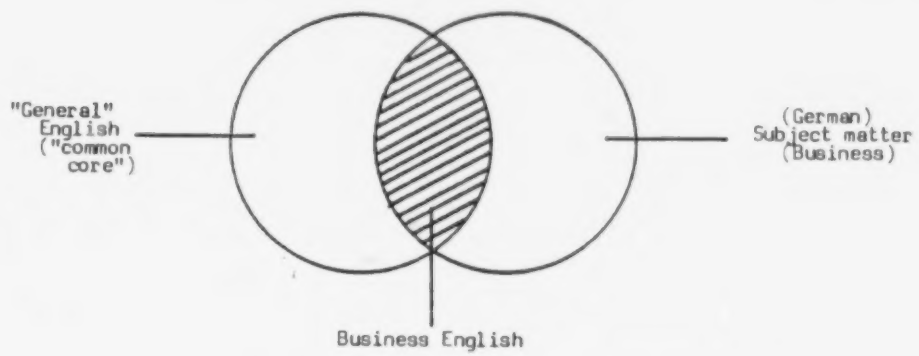
1 THE LANGUAGE COMPONENT

- is based on the concept that the traditional skills of
  - listening
  - reading
  - writing
  - speaking are interrelated

  and need to be taught as a complex of communicative functions.

2 THE BUSINESS COMPONENT

- is based on the conviction that English language skills and (German) subject matter overlap



- and need to be integrated as far as possible to achieve fast and effective business language learning.

3 THE INTERACTIVE COMPONENT

- is based on the understanding that language is a form of interaction that goes beyond mere "communicative skills"
- and that interactive language teaching needs to incorporate intercultural aspects in a situational approach.

FIGURE: 1

1.0 The Practical Aspect

We can distinguish two basic schools of thought in teaching business English in Germany:

(1) a "commercial correspondence orientation" and

(2) integrated business and language courses.

In the first case, the focus is on teaching a foreign language. Business topics, mostly of a solely commercial orientation, merely serve as a framework for teaching English grammar, idioms, vocabulary or communicative functions. As such, the past tense in English for example is practiced by filling in the blanks in sentences like:

From September 1970 to August 1971, I ------ a secretarial course. (Wolff, BUSINESS ENGLISH FOR YOUR JOB 1981,3/1985).

The student is supposed to fill in the correct form of the past tense like "attended" or "participated in". The only business content here is the term "secretarial course" and the language form of the past tense could just as well be taught in general English exercises.

Very often "communicative skills" are taught by reading fragmentary dialogues that provide cues of a telephone conversation for example and it seems questionable whether it is important enough to dedicate a whole unit of telephone answering varieties on a pattern drill level to students who are trained to interpret quantitative data in their other courses of study and whether the time would not be better allocated to teaching the techniques of making a business presentation.

We can see from these simple examples that the primary objective in the "commercial correspondence orientation" is language, not business. In practice, this is the most typical and commonly taught concept of English for business purposes today. It prevails for example in the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry courses leading to the English for commerce certificate examination. The same approach is used in courses preparing students for the German Chamber of Commerce and industry examination for the

Wirtschaftskorrespondent certificate in English.

The teaching and learning of English, not business, is the prime objective and it is typical for these courses that they stress written skills: a three-hour written exam is required to pass English for Commerce, while the oral examination is to last between 7 - 10 minutes, that's only about 5% of the total examination requirement.

The situation in Germany is not much better: the proportion of written to oral communication for the Wirtschaftskorrespondent-examination is 90 : 10.

It should be mentioned here that the courses leading to the German Volkshochschul-certificate "English for business purposes" are beginning to move away from their traditional orientation of building a basic or advanced business vocabulary and are attempting to integrate more COMMUNICATIVE skills. The inclusion of so-called "language operations" moves them closer to the functional approach, originally developed within the Council of Europe's functions and notions concept. However, they, too, are still very much written-biased: a 250 minute written examination compares with a 25 minute oral test.

Basically, the commercial correspondence orientation is also found in the Berufsakademien in Baden-Württemberg (e. g. Mannheim): their stated emphasis is on business terminology - although at least they want it to be taught on the basis of relevant business articles or Anglo-American business textbooks. In the written area their curriculum is very explicit: all varieties of commercial correspondence are to be covered from the various British and American letter head styles all the way to debt collection letters. As far as speaking skills are concerned, however, the requirements are at best vague: oral communication is to be taught via translation and interpreting exercises. There are no stated objectives or guidelines.

At the other end of the spectrum of teaching business English in Germany, we can observe a trend toward courses of study that attempt more integration of business content and foreign language teaching. Language here is not the objective but rather the means of teaching. In the ideal case it

is taught through business, similar to Widdowsons "English through science" concept which he introduced in 1968. Here, courses offered range from "US Fiscal or Monetary Policy" to "Interpreting Financial Data" or "Understanding Corporate Structure" (European Business School (EBS), Schloss Reichartshausen).

Study programs that combine the two subjects of business and English are becoming increasingly fashionable in the academic as well as in the practical field. Since about the end of the seventies the universities of Giessen and Erlangen-Nürnberg have instituted Business AND English courses as an alternative to their traditional literature-oriented "Anglistik" teacher training courses but these programs are primarily designed to fit the needs of future teachers who organize or implement business in-house English language training programs.

An even clearer trend towards integrating business subject matter and language skills can be seen in the programs for European business administration at the Fachhochschule Reutlingen and the European Business School, Schloss Reichartshausen (Östrich-Winkel). These programs are tailored to the needs of future Euro-managers and are proving to be very successful. Graduates of these programs are equipped with practical business experience in at least two countries (industrial placement periods in an English company are integrated in the course), a B.A. in European Business Administration and a German "Diplom", and are, to quote the TIMES, "certainly marketable" (The Times, Feb. 7, 1985). Entry requirements and the course of study are usually tough but the "return on investment" is high: in 1985, 64 graduates from the European Business School had 171 job offers to choose from and in Reutlingen 50% of the 1985 graduates-to-be had signed employment contracts before graduation (Manager Magazin 1, 86).

2.0 The Theoretical Aspect

Apparently, these integrated language and business courses are very successful. Before we take a closer look at how such programs can be developed it is necessary to look at some theoretical questions concerning the objectives of a

course in business language (either German or English), namely: where, when, and how will English later be used on the job or, more specifically: can

(1) the target group or business professional profiles,

(2) typical business situations,

(3) and the language skill requirements

be sufficiently specified to provide a basis for designing an English course tailored to fit the future businessman/-woman?

We will attempt to answer some of these questions on the basis of the results of a number of regional foreign language need surveys of German companies that have been conducted in the late 70s and early 80s (Bausch K.-R. et al.1980, Christ, H./Liebe, E./Schröder,K. 1979, Christ, H./Schwarze A. 1985, Schröder, K./Langheld,D./Macht, K. 1978).

All of these surveys basically agree in the areas concerning business profiles, business situations and required language skills.

2.1 Business Profiles

There is general agreement that due to the political and economic interdependence in all Western countries the use of foreign languages is a very common phenomenon - not just on the top floor or the secretarial level. One survey conducted in the area of Cologne and Düsseldorf (Germany) lists 253 different positions - primarily in middle management - in which English is needed - among them board assistant, product manager or senior programmer.

Considering this broad professional scope, the question arises, of course, whether a business language course should - and could - be tailored to fit all of those specific needs. And if not all, what are the needs that it should be tailored to? Here, I would suggest that since a college business administration program is designed to provide a moderately specialized training with a practical orientation on a scientific basis, it would make sense to orient the English program towards the general business profile and

not aim at a more specialized program. In more concrete terms this means that since colleges do not train company presidents or secretaries, the instruction in a business language should not be limited to either cocktail party conversation or commercial correspondence. Rather, it should be aimed at reinforcing the general business subject matter courses that are taught in the respective native languages, preferably focusing in on the country-specifics that lend themselves to comparison. For example, a general finance course in German could be supplemented by an English seminar on the differences between financial reporting in the US and Germany.

Thus, the answer to our first theoretical question, namely what's needed by our target group - business graduates - seems to be clear: A business English or German program should teach to the communicative, or better interactive skills in areas that are generally needed by any businessman or -woman, regardless of his/her later placement. These could be a.o. finance, organization or general management, i.e. areas that would be taught in regular business administration courses.

2.2 Business Situations

The foreign language surveys list more than 200 specific business situations in which a foreign language is needed. They range from attending a meeting and reserving a hotel room to opening a bank account or making a damage claim. This, of course, raises the question of which situations are relevant enough to be taught in a business English course.

Following Piepho's concept of communicative competence, there has been a general trend to include as many situations as possible in foreign language textbooks. However, some of the situations given are quickly outdated and also tend to be so specific that the students aren't able to see the "business" forest for looking at the "situational" trees.

Also, it is methodologically not possible to teach all situations that a student might face later on the job. Trying to do this would be comparable to - in a finance class - having a student calculate all depreciation rates (declining balance and straight line) for all possible equipment - hoping

that in his/her job he/she will later make less mistakes since he/she has already been through the situation once.

Thus we have to ask ourselves whether the future manager will more likely be faced with the situation of having to write an offer letter (which a competent secretary can easily handle anyway) or whether he or she may be expected to make a presentation on the market share of tennis shoes in front of the board.

With these considerations in mind we suggest that the list of situations given in the German company surveys above needs to be reduced down to a selected number of typical relevant situations. The selection should be made on the basis of generality, relevance and authenticity. In other words: Situational teaching - yes, but in moderation. Subject matter needs to be given a more important role in a business English program.

2.3 Language Skills

This brings us to our third theoretical question, namely whether there is any combination of skills - listening, speaking, reading and writing - that should have priority over others.

According to the 1984 Giessen survey (Christ,H./Schwarze, A. 1985), most companies need more oral skills than written correspondence. Not correspondence, but interactive oral skills should be the core of business language courses. (Christ, H./Schwarze, A. 1985:89). This then shows a great imbalance between actual practical needs, namely oral communication and the general practice of teaching writing skills, which usually means commercial correspondence.

In attempting to answer our third theoretical question - that is the combination of skills to be taught - we can say that business English courses should stress oral skills and train to using a combination of skills, like hearing and writing, which is required when attending a meeting, for instance, or hearing and speaking and writing skills, which is required when preparing and making a presentation or reacting to the questions in a discussion.

To recapitulate the theoretical aspect:

On the basis of the mentioned regional investigations into the foreign language needs of German companies, three principles that a business English program should incorporate can be identified:

(1) a general orientation towards the profile of the business manager - with only limited specialized course work.

(2) a moderate orientation towards typical interactive business situations - which do not obscure the view of the business subject matter content.

(3) a stronger orientation towards oral communication - however, not to be taught in isolation and not just in day-to-day "situations". Rather, a combination of skills in both formal and informal environments should be emphasized.

With these basic principles in mind, I would now like to introduce the concept of

3.0 INTERACTIVE BUSINESS COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH.

It consists of three interrelated components as you can see in Figure 1:

3.1. A LANGUAGE COMPONENT

- which is based on the concept that the traditional skills of
  - listening
  - reading
  - writing and
  - speaking are interrelated

and need to be taught as a complex of communicative functions.

3.2. A BUSINESS COMPONENT

- which is based on the idea that foreign language skills and (native) business subject matter overlap and need to be integrated as far as possible to achieve fast and efficient business language learning.

3.3 AN INTERACTIVE COMPONENT

- which is based on the understanding that language is a form of interaction that goes beyond mere "communicative" skills
- and that interactive language teaching needs to incorporate intercultural aspects in a situational approach.

Before discussing the language and business components some important comments about the INTERACTIVE COMPONENT should be kept in mind:

> Often it is not enough to only "communicate" effectively, but just as important to "ACT" competently in a different culture without necessarily using (verbal) language.

We all know trivial examples of socio-cultural differences in "acting": for instance that it is customary in Greece to nod when you want to say no or that in some Eastern countries white is the color of mourning, not black. The Germans are famous for shaking hands every time they meet, Anglo-saxons usually don't. These different ways to behave or act can cause great confusion to a person who is not aware of the intercultural differences. Let me add two business examples to show how interaction exceeds mere "communication" in a typical business environment: It is not customary in the United States to automatically give an employee who leaves the company what Germans call a "Zeugnis". Thus instead of presenting written "Zeugnisse" with an application, you will usually list two or three references who can attest to your job performance. If you are aware of this cultural difference, you will act differently: if you are leaving employment with a US firm, you would probably not ask for a written reference. And, on the other hand, if you're a German employer, you would not expect a potential employee to present a "Zeugnis" for a period of employment in the United States. Or: It is not common practice to attach a photograph to a resume with a job application in the United States. In Germany, however, this is standard practice - you would not send a job application without attaching a passport photograph of yourself as a means of identification.

As you can see, you may ACT differently in different

Figure 2

WIRTSCHAFTSENGLISCH
TYPISCHE SPRACHVERWENDUNGSSITUATIONEN FÜR BETRIEBSWIRTE
(TENTATIVE AUFSTELLUNG)

HANDLUNGSSITUATION / GEFORDERTE FERTIGKEITEN	LESEN	HÖREN	SCHREIBEN	SPRECHEN
1 BERUFSANTRITT/ARBEITSPLATZWECHSEL				
- Grundlegende Kenntnisse über Organisation u. Geschäftstätigkeit d. Unternehmens	X			X
- Stellenausschreibungen	X			
- Bewerbungen			X	
- Vorstellungsgespräch		X		X
- Annahme/Ablehnung einer Position	X		X	
2 TAGESGESCHEHEN IM UNTERNEHMEN				
- Routineabläufe	X	X		X
- Positionsbezeichnungen	X	X		X
- Telefongespräche (führen, weitergeben)		X		X
- wichtige Formulare u. Abkürzungen (Rechnungen, Anträge, Reisenabrechnungen)	X		X	
- allgemeine Geschäftskorrespondenz (Standardanfragen, Angebote, Beschwerden, Klärung v. Sachverhalten)	X		X	
- soziale Interaktionen (Begrüßungen; Besucher betreuen, Gesprächsthemen: soziale, kulturelle, politische, wirtschaftliche)		X		X
3 BESPRECHUNGEN - KONFERENZEN - SEMINARE				
Vorbereitung:				
- Analysenerarbeitung	X		X	
- Grundlagen d. Schriftverkehrs (Rundschreiben, Memos)	X		X	
- Informationsvorbereitung (Exzerpte anfertigen aus verschied. Quellen (Dokumente, Korrespondenz), Meinungen anderer zusammenfassen, Erstellung v. Tabellen u. statist. Material)	X		X	
- Tagesordnung erstellen (Zielsetzung, Prioritäten)	X		X	
Durchführung:				
- Vorsitz führen (Eröffnung d. Sitzung, Steuerung d. Diskussion, Abstimmung, Abschluß)		X		X
- auf Tagesordnung eingehen (Vorschläge machen, unterstützen, Infragestellen, klären)		X		X
- verhandeln (Argumente, Gegenargumente, Unterbrechungen, Meinungen einholen)		X		X
- Fachgespräche führen		X		X
- Protokollierung (Notizentechnik)		X	X	
Nacharbeiten:				
- Bearbeitung v. Dokumenten, die auf Sitzung verteilt wurden und d. Notizen d. Protokolls	X		X	
- Dokumentation (Verteilung v. Protokollen; follow-up)	X		X	
4 MITARBEIT/LEITUNG IN PROJEKTEN				
- verschiedene Arten d. Lesens (intensiv/ orientierend/kursorisch/aspektbezogen)	X			
- Umgang mit Katalogen, Indices, Standardnachschlagewerken	X			
- Exzerpte aus Lesestoff	X		X	
- Erstellung v. Fragebögen (Interviews, Firmenbesuche)			X	
- Durchführung v. Interviews		X		X
- Abfassen theoriebezogener Berichte, praktischer Abhandlungen und Trends, Zusammenfassungen (mit Hilfe graphischer u. visueller Mittel)	X		X	
- Präsentation - Vorbereitung (Aufbau, graph. Material) - Präsentation d. Ergebnisse, Erklären, Interpretation - Eingehen auf Fragen, Klärung v. Sachverhalten	X	X	X	X

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cultural settings - and this acting does not have to take the form of verbal communication. It is very important to integrate these socio-cultural aspects into foreign language teaching in general. Specifically with respect to teaching business English - and keeping in mind the overall objective of INTERACTIVE BUSINESS COMPETENCE - this can best be done within the framework of a business-oriented situational approach. For instance, I have shown here a sample list of typical situations which might be appropriate to include in a college business English or business German program. It is a tentative list and not intended to be final.

FIGURE 2

As you can see the examples I gave earlier about the "Zeugnisse" and photographs with job applications fit into the first situational setting.

Just as learning to handle these situations also involves developing intercultural competence, the teaching of them strengthens the traditional language skills of reading, listening, writing and speaking.

3.1 LANGUAGE COMPONENT

Keeping in mind that the traditional skills need to be taught as a complex of communicative functions, the following aspect needs to be given special attention, namely: that competence in a special language, here business English or German, proceeds from a basis of general German or English knowledge, a so-called "common core" of vocabulary, structures, idioms, or communicative functions, which very often cannot be clearly separated from the language used for specific purposes.

The extent to which "common core" needs to be taught, depends on the level of competence the students have in English. Teaching business English to students who have a high level of "common core" knowledge should complement the objectives for teaching business subject matter in their native language.

Using this integrated approach and taking management as a sample subject matter, INTERACTIVE BUSINESS COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH would involve among other things competence in the

Figure 3

THE LANGUAGE COMPONENT
(EXAMPLES OF LANGUAGE SKILLS)

Key Objective: Interactive Business Competence in English

Component Key Objective **Language:** To use the English language in Management-related activities

Specific Objectives: review, reinforce and extend grammar, idioms, general and specialist vocabulary as well as communicative functions

Examples: (**NOT** to be understood as a complete list)

Activity	Skills (a.o.)	Teaching Methods (a.o.)
Discussing management matters; negotiating; setting priorities	listening, speaking	guided discussion groups, role playing, case studies
Taking notes of board or departmental meetings or seminars; preparing minutes/summaries on the basis of notes	listening, writing	taking notes of seminars and lectures; preparing minutes of seminars; summarizing video plays or films
Preparing management reports or correspondence (memos, circulars)	reading, writing	preparing seminar papers on selected topics; evaluating business literature under certain aspects; extracting information from various documents (annual reports, project reports, correspondence, technical literature)
Making presentations	reading, speaking	presentation of seminar papers; evaluating and presenting business data; researching and presenting topical information; making simulated project presentations

- Depending on the students' level of competence, traditional grammar, idioms, vocabulary and or, communicative instruction needs to be provided.

following combinations of language skills:

FIGURE 3

- discussing and negotiating management matters, which involves at a minimum the skills of listening and speaking and could be taught within (accompanying) seminars. The teaching method could be guided discussions, role playing and the analyzing of case studies;
- taking notes at meetings and preparing minutes from these notes. This involves the skills of listening and writing, and could also take place within the framework of (accompanying seminars), namely in the form of preparing minutes of lectures and seminars;
- preparing management reports or correspondence. This involves at a minimum the language skills of reading and writing and could be taught by researching and presenting business data and extracting and presenting information from various documents (annual reports, project reports, correspondence or technical literature)
- finally, making presentations, which requires the student to use a combination of all language skills: reading and speaking, writing and listening. Ideally again, this could be taught in seminars by presenting simulated project reports or presentations.

These skill combinations should be regarded not as a complete list but as a minimum catalog of language activities/functions that - from a language point of view - the future manager should be able to handle.

3.2 BUSINESS COMPONENT

Here we can begin to see how interactive business competence in a foreign language can be achieved by integrating language and business subjects.

A course in general management for example would consist (as you can see in Figure 4) of lectures in the native language on the management process with accompanying seminars on the management functions of

PLANNING, LEADING, ORGANIZING AND CONTROLLING.

Figure 4.

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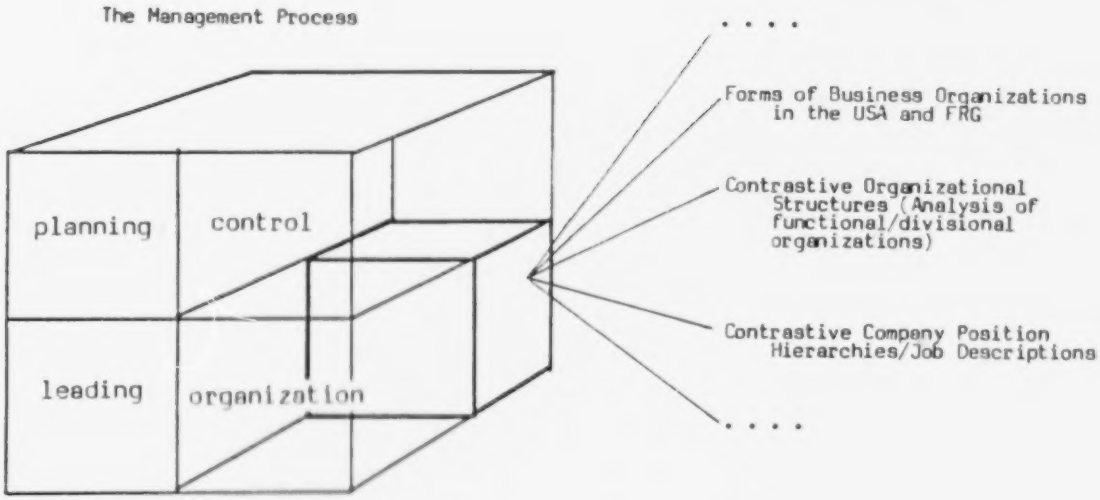
THE BUSINESS COMPONENT
(EXAMPLE OF THEMATIC CONTENT)

Lecture (A)

Accompanying seminars (B)



0. Key Objective: Interactive Business Competence in English

1. Component Key Objective **Business:** Understanding the Basics of the Management Process

1.1 Specific Objective (A)

introduce/reinforce the four major functions
- management planning
- management leading
- management organization
- management control

Method:

50% lecture; 50% discussion

1.2 Specific Objective (B)

introduce/reinforce contrastive, country-specific aspects, e.g. company structure/position hierarchies/job descriptions

Method:

Seminar, active participation on the part of the students

basic: research factual data; short presentations in class
intermediate: interpret and discuss differences with reference to topical events
advanced: role playing; project presentations; case studies

The seminars would deal with contrastive aspects, i.e. those that stress phenomena or conventions that are different in the countries under comparison.

For example, within management LEADING, different motivational theories could be covered IN THE LECTURE, and country-specific motivators, like for example top executive benefits could be compared IN THE SEMINAR. In a seminar supplementing the CONTROLLING function, the students could compare different formats of the balance sheet or the income statement in Germany and the US. For the last function, management ORGANIZING, Figure 4 shows in more detail some possible seminar topics that would accompany the lecture, for example forms of business organization in the US and Germany or position hierarchies and job descriptions.

The latter topic is particularly interesting with regard to top management positions. Here, the Anglo-saxon one-level board system could be contrasted with the German two-level Aufsichtsrat- and Vorstand system and the students would learn to cope with the wide array of top positions in the US, ranging from chairman of the board, chief executive officer, chief operating officer, executive vice president, senior vice president or group presidents compared to the formal positions of Aufsichtsrats- und Vorstandsvorsitzender in Germany. These seminars would actively involve the students with authentic foreign language business literature by requiring them to:

(1) compare parallel texts, i.e. the German Aktiengesetz with regard to the Aufsichtsrat/Vorstand positions or standard reference books in the United States, like the AMA's Manual of position descriptions.

(2) compare job advertisements in German or US business magazines, or evaluate the international appointments column in the Financial Times.

(3) consult parallel German-English texts like the Harvard business review and the German Harvard Manager.

(4) research annual reports of American and German corporations.

The key to achieving interactive business competence in a foreign language is that the foreign language is taught

through business.

In summary one can say:

(1) Business language courses need to be oriented towards the roles that the students will later assume in their jobs. In the case of business graduates the goal should be to prepare them for their roles as future managers. This requires more stress on general business matters and less on specifics like correspondence.

(2) The teaching methods in business language courses should make use of a business-related situational approach, incorporating the intercultural aspect while also strengthening the students abilities in business content matter and language skill combinations. This instruction should also place more emphasis on oral communication - including formal oral presentations - which foreign language surveys have found to be a more important requirement.

(3) The overall goal of these programs should be to prepare the students to interact competently in English in their roles as managers. This implies, of course, a mastery of all language skills - reading, writing, listening and speaking. But that alone is not enough: it also requires intercultural competence in dealing with business situations and can best be achieved by using a comparative approach that focuses on country-specific differences and integrates English with business subject matter.

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